Great Contemplations / Mahavakyas

Swami Jnaneshvara

The Great Utterances: The *Mahavakyas* are the Great Sentences of contemplation. The *Mahavakyas* are the essence of Advaita Vedanta and Jnana Yoga, and are contained in the Upanishads. *Maha* is Great, and *Vakyas* are sentences, or utterances for contemplation. They provide perspective and insights that tie the texts together in a cohesive whole. The contemplations on the *Mahavakyas* also blend well with the practices of meditation, prayer, and mantra, which are companion practices in Yoga. The pinnacle of the wisdom and practices of the ancient sages is contained in the terse twelve verses of the Mandukya Upanishad, which outlines the philosophy and practices of the OM mantra.

These make the wisdom more accessible: Seven *Mahavakyas* are described below. By focusing on these seven *Mahavakyas*, the rest of the principles of self-exploration described in Vedanta and the Upanishads are more easily accessible. Included with the descriptions below are suggestions on *what to do* with these seven *Mahavakyas*.

Validation in the inner laboratory: To truly understand the meaning of the *Mahavakyas* it is necessary to practice contemplation and meditation in your own inner laboratory of stillness and silence. It means doing a lot of self observation, including the four functions of mind. You may find it useful to learn both the Sanskrit and the English of the *Mahavakyas*. They are not practiced as blind faith beliefs, but rather are reflected on, so that their meaning is validated in direct experience.

Start by hearing the insights described: Some methods of contemplation give you a principle, a word, on which to reflect, but give no clues of the insights that will come. For example, if you contemplate on the word *Truth*, that is very broad, and may have many meanings. It might take a long time to even come to a core principle. Sometimes, in school or elsewhere, you have probably seen a study guide that has a list of questions that also includes the answers, in a Q&A format. With the *Mahavakyas*, it is somewhat like that, in that the *Mahavakyas* provide the answers, already written down. You still have to do the contemplations, but the journey is much more direct.

Direct experience, not mere belief: In contemplating the *Mahavakyas*, it is not a matter of merely accepting that the statements are true. In the oral teachings of the sages, it is said that you should never merely *believe* what you are told or what you read in a book. Rather, it is suggested that you should check it out for yourself in the inner laboratory of direct experience. It also seems true that, while ultimate oneness is the same for all, there is also a coloring of cultural and religious influences that determine the way in which different people will experience the early, or unfolding stages of insight.

Dig deep in only a few wells: It can appear that exploring only a few sentences, like these seven, is a mere beginning point, and that one must subsequently learn hundreds

or thousands of other sentences. This is definitely not the case. Although in academic circles one may do complex intellectual analysis of many scholarly commentaries, comparing and contrasting viewpoints, the seeker of direct experience digs deep into the well of only a few such contemplations. In the monastic traditions of the swami order, a monk may contemplate exclusively on a single *Mahavakya* or maybe several of them. The practice bears fruit by deeply going into one, or a few, rather than memorizing many, or doing only intellectual analysis of the many.

Over and over and over: The passionately dedicated practitioner will contemplate on one or more of the *Mahavakyas* repeatedly, often, over a long period of time. Mind gradually comes to have a greater understanding, and then becomes still as the contemplation shifts from an observing, reflective process into a deep contemplative meditation. Reflection transforms into insight, which again transforms into the direct experience of the underlying truth or reality of the *Mahavakya*.

Companion practices: In the oral tradition of the Himalayan sages, the Yoga Sutras, Vedanta, and internal Tantra are companions on the journey to Self-Realization. The practices of the Yoga Sutras stabilize and clear the clouded mind. The Vedanta practices form a philosophical basis and means for discovering the underlying unity of the different aspects of our being. Internal Tantra provides the means for awakening the spiritual energy, so that the absolute, unchanging reality at our core is realized.

Mahavakyas are at the heart of Vedanta: These seven principles below are practices at the heart of the Vedanta part of the triad. Actually, all of these emerged out of the one source of teachings, and now appear to be three separate practices. The higher understanding and direct experience comes from written or oral ‘listening,’ (sravana), followed by deep reflection or contemplation (manana), and deep contemplative meditation (niddhidhyasana).

Advaita Vedanta or Non-Dual Reality: It is popular to speak of Advaita as if it were a brand name of spirituality. It is not. Advaita is exactly what it says, Advaita, which means non-duality, not-two. If this little planet were to fall into the sun and burn up, there would no longer be any religionists or philosophers, but that which truly ‘is’ still ‘is.’ Advaita is exactly what it says it is, Advaita, not-two, which stands alone. Any suggestion that there are things such as Hindu Advaita or Buddhist Advaita or Anything-Else Advaita are games of the mind. To transcend all of the levels of false identity so as to ‘Be’ that Reality of Advaita is the Knowledge or Jnana that is sought. It is only the most sincere and longing of aspirants who seek and Know this in direct experience. For others, it is merely an arena of philosophical and religious debate. For those who Know, Advaita stands alone.

Who am I? It has become very popular in recent years to criticize the practice of *Mahavakyas*, suggesting instead that one simply ask 'Who am I?' and then reject any response which arises from within (other than ‘I am That!’)? It is commonly suggested that one NOT contemplate any of the phrases such as 'Aham Brahmasmi' ('I am Brahman, the Absolute Reality'). Such suggestions to NOT practice *Mahavakyas* presuppose the incorrect opinion that contemplation on *Mahavakyas* is only a mere mental process, missing the fact that the *Mahavakya* leads one to deep silence wherein

the reality is experienced directly. Contemplation on the *Mahavakyas* is not mere chanting of mantras or reprogramming the mind with affirmations as if one were trying to inculcate an alternative belief system. It moves in stages, culminating in the highest of direct experience of the meaning of the *Mahavakyas* . Contemplation on the *Mahavakyas* and the question 'Who am I?' are not in conflict with one another. Rather, they go hand in hand, in a systematic, unified practice.

Stages of Yoga Vedanta Meditation and Contemplation

Swami Rama

Meditation and contemplation are two different techniques, yet they are complementary to each other. Meditation is a definite method of training oneself on all levels—body, breath, conscious mind, and unconscious mind—while contemplation builds a definite philosophy. Without the support of a solid philosophy, the method of meditation does not lead to higher dimensions of consciousness.

Contemplation makes one aware of the existence of the Reality, but Reality can be experienced only through the higher techniques of meditation. In the Vedanta system, meditation and contemplation are both used. When an aspirant tires of meditation because of lack of endurance, then he contemplates on the mahavakyas [great contemplations] and studies those scriptures that are helpful in the path of Self-realization and enlightenment. Contemplation, vichara, complements the Vedantic way of meditation, dhyana.

In Vedanta philosophy, there is a definite method used for contemplation. Ordinarily, the mind remains busy in self-dialogue, entangled in the web of its thought patterns. Because of desires, feelings, and emotions, unmanageable conflicts are created in one's mental life. But the Vedanta way of contemplating transforms the entire personality of the aspirant, for the statements, mahavakyas, imparted by the preceptor create a dynamic change in the values of his life. These statements are compact, condensed, and abstruse srutis and cannot be understood without the help of a preceptor who is fully knowledgeable of the scriptures and these terse texts. Only a realized teacher can impart the profundity of such knowledge in a lucid language.

The thoughts, feelings, and desires which were once important to the aspirant lose their value, for he has only one goal to attain. The glory of contemplation brings a dynamic transformation to the internal states of the aspirant. This seems to be very necessary, because that which creates a barrier or becomes an obstacle for students loses its strength due to the power of contemplation, which transforms all his internal states.

First, an aspirant attentively listens to the sayings of the Upanishads from a preceptor who is Brahman-conscious all the time.

In the second step, he practices vichara (contemplation), which means that he goes to the depths of the great sayings and determines to practice them with mind, action, and speech.

One-pointed devotion, full determination, and dedication lead him to the higher step called nididhyasana. Here he acquires comprehensive knowledge of the Ultimate Truth. But he has not yet attained the final step of consciousness that leads him to the direct realization of the one self-existent Truth without second.

The highest state of contemplation is called saksatkara. In this state, perception and conceptualization are in complete agreement, and all the doubts from all levels of understanding vanish forever. At this height of knowledge, truth reveals itself to the aspirant, and perfect realization is accomplished, "I am Atman – I am Brahman." This state of advaita is attained by the process of contemplation. Meditation plays an entirely different role and helps the aspirant make his mind one-pointed, inward, and steady.

Steadiness and stillness are practiced from the very beginning in this meditational method. The method of sitting, the method of breathing, the method of concentration, and the method of allowing a concentrated mind to flow uninterruptedly are subsequent steps that help the aspirant to expand his capacity so that he can contemplate without distraction.

Meaning of the word *brahman*

Root of the word: The word *brahman* comes from the root *brha* or *brhi*, which means knowledge, expansion, and all-pervasiveness. It is that existence which alone exists, and in which there is the appearance of the entire universe.

Not subject to change: *Brahman* means the absolute reality, that which is eternal, and not subject to death, decay, or decomposition. In English, we speak of omnipresence or oneness. This is the principle of the word *brahman*.

Not a proper name: *Brahman* is not a proper name (like the name of a person), but a Sanskrit word that denotes that oneness, the non-dual reality, the substratum underneath all of the many names and forms of the universe. *Brahman* is somewhat like the difference between the word *ocean*, and the specific ocean called *Pacific Ocean*. The word *brahman* is like *ocean*, not *Pacific Ocean*. Brahman is not a name of God. These contemplations neither promote nor oppose any particular religious concept of God.

Immanance and transcendence: One may also choose to think of *brahman* in theological terms, though that is not necessary. Within that perspective, the scholars speak of two principles: *immanence* and *transcendence*. *Immanence* is described as the divinity existing in, and extending into all parts of the created world. In that sense, the *Mahavakyas* can be read as suggesting there is no object that does not contain, or is not part of that creation.

It's really indescribable, as it is beyond form: However one chooses to hold the word *brahman*, it is very useful to remember that *brahman* is often described as indescribable. For convenience sake, it is said that *brahman* is the nature of existence, consciousness, and bliss, though admitting that these words, too, are inadequate.

Seek direct experience: The real meaning comes only in direct experience resulting from contemplation and yoga meditation.

1) Brahma satyam jagan mithya

Brahman is real; the world is unreal
(The absolute is real; the world is unreal or only relatively real)

Brahman is real: The way in which *brahman* is *real* is like saying that the clay in a pot is real, or the gold in a bracelet is real (metaphorically speaking). The idea is that first there was clay and gold, and when those changed form, there now appears to be a pot and a bracelet.

The world is unreal: However, when the pot is broken, or the bracelet is melted, there is once again only clay and gold. It is in that sense that the pot and the bracelet are *not real*; they come and go from manifestation. They are not as *real* as are the clay and the gold. (Remember that these are metaphors, and that obviously, we could also say that clay and gold also come and go, such as when planets are born and die from the nuclear fire of suns. Also, note that using the English words *real* and *unreal* for the Sanskrit words *satyam* and *mithya*, are not perfect, but they are the best we have to work with.)

Something is more real than the temporary: In saying that *the world is unreal*, it means to say that literally everything we experience in the external world is, like the pot and the bracelet, in a process of coming, being, and going (so too with all of the objects of the subtle realm). If the *Mahavakya* stopped there, this might appear to be a negative, or depressing comment. But it does not stop there. It makes the added comment that this absolute reality is, in a sense, more *real* than the temporary appearances.

Two points: Thus, the *Mahavakya* does two major things:

- **Reminder of the temporary**: First, it serves as a reminder of the temporary nature of the worldly objects.
- **Reminder of the eternal**: Second, it serves as a reminder that there is an eternal nature, that is not subject to change.

An invitation to know: In these reminders there is an invitation to come to know, in direct experience, the existence, consciousness, and bliss that is this eternal essence of our being.

Don't stop living in the world: When practicing contemplation with this, and the other *Mahavakyas*, it is important to *not* allow the reflection that *the world is unreal* to stop you

from doing your actions in the external world. To think that the world is *unreal*, and therefore we need not do anything is a grave mistake. The realization of the *unreality* of the world and the *reality* of the essence behind the world brings freedom, not bondage or lethargy.

1. Exercises with 'Brahma satyam jagan mithya'
Brahman is real; the world is unreal
(The absolute is real; the world is unreal or only relatively real)

> ***What to do:*** The purpose of contemplation and yoga meditation exercises is to attain Self-realization, or enlightenment, which has to do with knowing or experiencing the deepest, eternal aspect of our own being. By working with this *Mahavakya*, one increasingly sees the difference between what is temporary and what is eternal.
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> - **Be mindful of the passing objects**: One way to work with this *Mahavakya*, is to simply be mindful of the world around you. Gradually, gently, and lovingly observe the countless objects that are ever in a process of coming and going.
> - **Remember the eternal**: Allow yourself to also remember the eternal nature that is always there, enjoying the beauty of how this process ebbs and flows through that unchanging, eternal essence.
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> **Be mindful of your own temporary and eternal**: As you witness the external world in this way, allow your attention to shift to your own physical, energetic, and mental makeup. Gradually comes the insight that these more surface aspects are also temporary, and in a sense, are also *unreal*, or only *relatively* real. It increasingly allows the mind to see that there is an eternal aspect of our being, and that this is actually the source of the mind itself. The mind comes to see that it must, itself, let go, so as to experience the eternal that is within.
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> **Practice this at daily meditation time**: By observing the world in this way, it is then easier to do the same kind of silent observation and contemplation while sitting in the stillness of your meditation time. Over time, the depth of the insights increase, as an inner expansion comes.

The different Mahavakyas work together: In practice, the *Mahavakyas* work together. This becomes evident by exploring the others, such as the ones that follow below.

2) Ekam evadvitiyam brahma

Brahman is one, without a second
(There is one absolute reality, without any secondary parts)

No object is truly independent: As our attention goes from object to object, image to image, we keep finding that those objects and images are only relatively real (as discussed above). Gradually, we come to see that no object exists independently from *brahman*, the whole. Hence, it is said there is one, *without a second*. Wherever we look,

whatever we think or feel, try as we will, we can find no *second* object or part. Everything is seen as a manifestation of something else.

The objects are made of the same stuff: To speak of one, without a second, is like thinking of thousands of cups or bracelets made from clay or gold. As you look at each of the cups and bracelets, one at a time, you conclude that this cup, and this bracelet is not separate from the whole field of clay and gold. Suddenly you come to the insight that there is not a single cup that is separate from clay, and there is not a single bracelet separate from gold. In other words, you see that there is one field, without a second object, or simply stated, there is *one, without a second*.

Once again, this can also be viewed in a theological way, wherein *immanence* (versus *transcendence*) means the divinity existing in, and extending into all parts all parts of the created world. Thus, there is no object that does not contain, or is not part of that creation.

2. Exercises with 'Ekam evadvitiyam brahma '

Brahman is one, without a second
(There is one absolute reality, without any secondary parts)

> ***What to do:*** Keep exploring the latter part of the sentence, the part of being *without a second*. Consciously look at the objects of the world, and the thoughts that arise in the mind. Observe whether it has independent existence and permanence. It is like asking, *"Does this object or thought exist on its own? Does it stay in this form, or does it go away? Is it, therefore a second object in comparison to the whole?"*
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> - **Try to find a *second* object**: One practice is to repeatedly look for some *second* object, which has independent existence from the whole, from *brahman*.
> - **You'll find there is none**: The aspirant will repeatedly find that there is *no* second object, which has independent existence, but that all objects derive from some *other*, like the pots from clay, or bracelets from gold. This brings the increasing awareness of underlying wholeness.
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> **See the beauty of oneness in diversity**: If this is approached as a mere philosophical opinion, if we merely *believe* the principle, then the deep insight that comes from exploration will be missed. Each time that some new object or thought is seen to *not* be a *second* in relation to the whole, the personal realization of the truth of the principle will become deeper and more profound. We come to see the beauty in this, to see the joy of wholeness, of the unity within the diversity. The interrelationship between the *Mahavakyas* will also become clearer.

3. Prajnanam brahman

Brahman is the supreme knowledge

(Knowing the absolute reality is the supreme knowledge)
(from Aitareya Upanishad of Rig Veda)

Knowledge out of which other knowledge arises: There are many types of knowledge one can attain. However, they all stem from, or are a part of, a higher knowledge. There is one exception, and that is the absolute knowledge, which is the highest. It is called absolute because it is not stemming from something else. Supreme knowledge is the ground out of which the diversity of knowledge and experience grows. The plant, though appearing separate, is made of the stuff of the ground.

Many metaphors for higher knowledge: It is just about impossible to write words describing this notion of *supreme* knowledge, which is part of the reason that there are so many different descriptions given by many people. Thus, we use metaphor after metaphor trying to capture and communicate the essence of the meaning. This *Mahavakya* is saying that as you climb the ladder of knowledge, this higher knowledge is to be found at the level of *brahman*, the oneness of universal consciousness.

Reflect on lower knowledge to find the higher: Reflecting on lower knowledge might give some idea. The knowledge of how to ride a bicycle is a form of knowledge, but it is based on the higher knowledge of how to move your body. The knowledge of complex mathematics is based on the higher, more foundational, prerequisite knowledge that allows the thinking process itself. When you see a person that you recognize as your friend, there was first an ability to see and conceptualize, which is a higher knowledge.

Find the foundation: Intuitively, you come to see that there is consciousness, or whatever term you would like to use, that is higher, more foundational, or prerequisite to the lower knowledge in all of its other forms. The highest rung of the ladder is called supreme knowledge, *prajna*, and this is said to be one and the same with *brahman*, the oneness.

Knowing is not mere intellectualizing: It is extremely important to note here, that this is *not* a process of intellectualizing. *Knowledge* refers to *knowing* or *awareness*, not just a linear, cognitive thinking process. The knowledge here, is more like the knowledge of recognizing an object as a *tree*, than the process of adding up a list of numbers. There is simply no more straightforward way of saying it, than to say it is a matter of *knowing* the tree.

Knowing applies to both head and heart people: Also, it is not that some people are *intellectual*, or *head* people, while others are *emotional*, or *heart* people. While these differences between people might be real, this *Mahavakya* is talking about a universal principle that applies to all people. The practices themselves are applicable to all people, whether inclined towards the *head* or the *heart*, though different people will quite naturally have different experiences leading to the same ultimate realizations.

3. Exercises with ‘Prajnanam brahman’

Brahman is the supreme knowledge
(Knowing the absolute reality is the supreme knowledge)

What to do: In trying to reflect on the nature of supreme knowledge, the eternal substratum of all other knowledge, the mind will present many memories, images, impressions, thoughts, sensations, and emotions. All of these are some form of knowledge, that's for sure. However, they are not the highest knowledge.

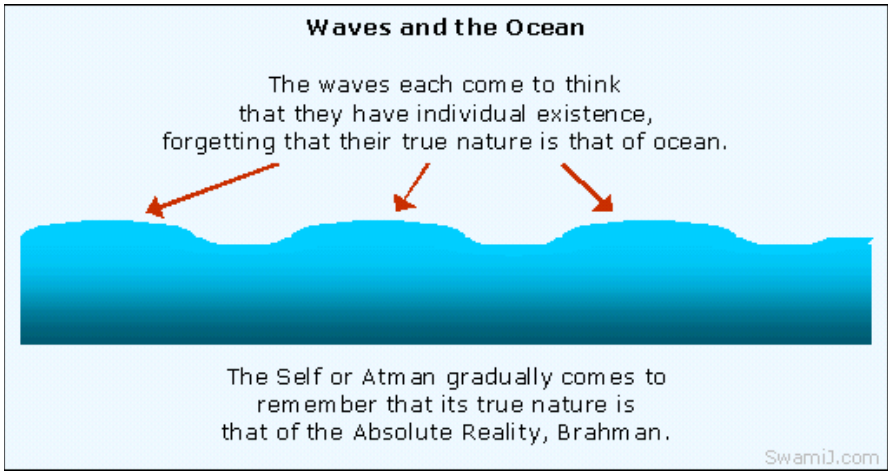
- **Ask yourself if a knowledge is lower or higher**: Simply allow these thought patterns to arise. Then ask yourself, "Is this the higher knowledge?" Repeatedly you will find that the answer is *no*, that it is *not* the higher, but is a lower form of knowledge.
- **Remember there is higher knowledge**: This kind of reflection leaves a quietness in which the intuition of the existence of the higher knowledge starts to come. The intuition deepens with practice. This quietness is not one of lethargy or laziness, but rather of clarity and openness. It brings a smile to the face and to the heart, as the field of knowing gradually expands towards the wisdom of the *Mahavakya*.

4. Tat tvam asi

That is what you are
(That absolute reality is the essence of what you really are)

That is what YOU are: This *Mahavakya* is stated as if one person is speaking to the other, saying, "That is what you are!" when referring to brahman. The person speaking is the teacher, and person being spoken to is the student.

It is YOU at the deepest level: Imagine that the teacher has explained to you all of the above *Mahavakyas*, that you had reflected on these, and that you started to have some sense of the meaning of the oneness called *brahman*. Imagine that the teacher then pointed a finger at you and explained, "That *brahman*, that oneness, is who you really are, at the deepest level of your being!" It is like telling a wave in the ocean that it IS the ocean.


Waves and the Ocean
The waves each come to think
that they have individual existence,
forgetting that their true nature is that of ocean.
The Self or Atman gradually comes to
remember that its true nature is
that of the Absolute Reality, Brahman.
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You are the person underneath the personality: Often, we hold on to our personal identities, such as being from this or that family, organization, or country. We take on the identity of our roles in our jobs or in our families, such as father or mother, sister or brother, son or daughter. Or, we come to believe that who we are, is our personality traits that have developed through living. We forget our true nature, that is underneath all of these only relative identities.

We continue our duties, holding identities loosely: The realization of this *Mahavakya*, *Tat tvam asi*, leads us to see that the relative identities are not who we really are. It does not mean that we drop our duties in the world, or stop acting in service of other people because of this realization. Rather, we become ever more free to hold those identities loosely, while increasingly being able to act in the loving service of others, independent of attachment to our false identities.

4. Exercises with 'Tat tvam asi'

That is what you are
(That absolute reality is the essence of what you really are)

What to do: As if talking to yourself, direct your attention inward, possibly towards the heart center. Say to yourself, "*That is who you are!*"

- **Point a finger at yourself**: You might want to even point your index finger at your own chest, the place from where you experience, "I am." As you hold in awareness the essence of the truth that this *brahman*, this *oneness*, is who you *really* are, also observe how you can gently let go of the false identities, seeing that they are only temporary and relatively *me*.
- **Say to yourself, "That is who you are"**:When reflecting on the other *Mahavakyas*, such as *brahman is the supreme knowledge*, then shift the observation from that truth, directing attention to your own inner being and say, "*Tat tvam asi; That you are!*"
- **Remember the inner feeling**: Notice the inner feeling that comes from the statement and the realization of your spiritual nature, rather than your more surface level of mental or physical identity.

5. Ayam atma brahma

Atman and Brahman are the same

(The individual Self is one and the same with the absolute)

The wave and the ocean are one: Is the wave separate from the ocean? Not really, but sometimes we lose sight of that. Imagine that you are standing by the ocean, watching the vastness of the ocean. Imagine that a really big wave starts to come ashore, and that your attention comes to this one wave. You intently notice it, becoming absorbed in the crashing of the surf, and the feel of the salt spray. In that moment, you are only aware of the immensity of this one wave. The ocean itself is forgotten during that time.

Then, an instant later, you recall with an inner "*Aha!*", that the wave and the ocean are one and the same.

- **Atman** refers to that pure, perfect, eternal spark of consciousness that is the deepest, central core of our being.
- **Brahman** refers to the *oneness* of the manifest and unmanifest universe.

It is like saying that *atman* is a wave, and *brahman* is the ocean. The insight of *Ayam atma brahma* is that the wave and the ocean are one and the same.

Atman seems to be here, and brahman there: Notice how the statement *Ayam atma brahma* (*Atman and Brahman are the same*) is framed as if you are a separate observer of both *Atman* and *Brahman*. It is like standing at the beach, looking out at both the wave and the ocean, and declaring that the wave and the ocean are one. You are observing from a witnessing stance, outside of both of them . Notice how this perspective contrasts with *Aham brahmasmi* (*I am Brahman*), which declares that "I am!", an inner experience, rather than from an observing standpoint (like being on the beach).

Different perspectives for the underlying reality: In this way, each of the *Mahavakyas* gives a different perspective of the same underlying Reality. Gradually, they are seen as mirror reflections of the same *Absolute Reality*. That integrated flash of insight touches on the true meaning of the word *brahman*. It is like gaining different *points of view* from different *viewing points*. Together, they converge in a complete understanding.

5. Exercises with 'Ayam atma brahma'

Atman and Brahman are the same
(The individual Self is one and the same with the absolute)

What to do: Sit quietly and reflect on the inner core of your being, such as by placing your attention in the space between the breasts, the heart center.

- **Be aware of your center**: Don't visualize anything, but allow your awareness to touch the feeling aspect of the center of your being. Or, if you like to visualize internally, imagine a tiny spark of light that represents the eternal essence your own self, the *atman*. Hold this attention for a few seconds or minutes.
- **Shift to awareness of the universe**: Then, shift your attention in such a way that you are imagining the breadth of the entire manifest and unmanifest universe, the gross, subtle, and causal realms. Imagine the oneness that permeates all, and is all. Do this in a way that you are aware of the essence in which all exists, like being aware of the gold or the clay described above.
- **Then be aware of both as separate**: Then, allow your attention to hold *both* the awareness of the spark that is *atman* and the universal essence that is *brahman*. Be aware of *atman* also being within that oneness of *brahman*. Allow this to bring

insight and peace. You might want to internally think the words of the *Mahavakya,* "*Ayam atma brahma; atman and brahman are the same*."

- **Be aware of both as one**: It is a beautiful practice to do the same thing in relation to other people. Think of the people who are closest to you, including family, friends, and coworkers. Allow yourself to notice the surface levels of their actions and speech, their physical features, and their personalities. Be aware of the subtle aspects of their makeup, and of the spark of the eternal that is the center of their consciousness. Be aware of how that spark, *atman*, is one with the oneness, *brahman*.

Different insights from different Mahavakyas: Notice the different insights and feelings between the *Mahavakyas*. The insight from *Tat tvam asi* (*That is who you are*) is experienced differently from *Ayam atma brahma* (*This individual Self is one with the absolute*). The two simply feel different internally, yet they work together, describing the same fundamental truth about about who we are. By experiencing the separate vantage points, the whole is more completely experienced.

6) Aham brahmasmi

I am Brahman
(Who I really am, is that absolute reality.)

If a gold bracelet could speak: Imagine two possibilities of what a gold bracelet might say, if it could speak. It might say one of these two things:

1. "I am a *bracelet*!"
2. "I am *gold*!"

Bracelet is temporary: Which is more true, more everlasting? We might be tempted to say that #1 is more accurate, in that *bracelet* seems more encompassing, being both bracelet and gold at the same time. However, the *bracelet* aspect is not eternal. It is temporary. It is only a matter of the particular shape in which the gold was molded. Is *bracelet* what it *really* is?

Gold is everlasting: What is always true, is #2, that "I am gold," everlasting, ever pure, and not subject to death, decay, and decomposition. (One might argue that gold is not everlasting either, but in the metaphor, gold is being only used as an example.)

Bracelet is gold; I am gold: Note that this metaphor may sound similar to the ones above, regarding the impermanence of a bracelet and the permanence of the gold (metaphorically speaking). This is not the case. The realization that, "I am gold!" or "I am brahman!" is an *internal* experience compared to the statement, "The bracelet is gold!" (which sounds like the bracelet *over there*). The two insights are separate, though they also come to be the same.

Similarly, it is very different to realize, in direct experience, "*I am brahman!*" than one of the statements such as, "*Brahman alone is real!*":

- **Out there**: "Brahman alone is real!" seems to be about the world *out there*. It is a valid perspective.
- **In here**: "I am brahman!" is an inner declaration of who I am, *in here*. This is also a valid perspective.

Truth comes in the stillness of intuitive flash: The truth of a *Mahavakya* comes through intuitive flash, that is progressively deeper as one practices. It is not merely an intellectual process, as it might appear to be by explaining the gold metaphor. The metaphors are used as a means of explaining the principle, but this is not the end of the process. In a sense, such explanations are only the beginning of the process. The key is in the still, silent reflection in the inner workshop of contemplation and yoga meditation.

After thinking, let go into contemplative insight:The initial insights come somewhat like the creative process when you are trying to solve some problem in daily life. You think and think, and then finally let go into silence. Then, suddenly, the creative idea just pops out, giving you the solution to your problem. The contemplation on the *Mahavakyas* is somewhat like that at first. Later, it goes into deeper meditation.

Insight comes within your own context: One may experience himself or herself as being like the gold or the clay, or like a wave in an ocean of bliss, that realizes the wave is also the ocean. With all these metaphors used only as tools of explanation, the insight of each person will come in the context of their own culture and religion, and will not seem foreign or unnatural. One's religious values are not violated, but rather, are affirmed.

6. Exercises with ‘Aham brahmasmi'

I am Brahman
(Who I really am, is that absolute reality.)

What to do: Reflect on the oneness, or *brahman*, and the meaning, as suggested in the practices above. Allow your attention to focus on the insights from those Mahavakyas, such as *Brahman is one, without a second*.

- **Literally ask questions of yourself**: Ask yourself, internally, "Who am I? Am I this body, or do I have a body? Am I this breath, or is this breath just flowing? Am I this mind, or is this mind a manifestation of some deeper truth? Who am I, *really*? Who *am* I?"

- **Make your own declarations**: Inside the chamber of your own being, declare to yourself, *"I am brahman. I am not only a wave, I am made of ocean. I am ocean!"* Allow the truth of the statements to expand. Be sure to practice such affirmations only if you have reflected on them, and find truth in them. This is not about selling yourself, but on affirming what you know.

- **In daily life, when sitting, or resting**: As you do these contemplations, you might be right in the middle of your daily life. Or, you might be sitting straight in a formal yoga meditation posture. Or, you might be resting comfortably in a chair,

on a sofa, or lying down in a relaxed position. There is a great diversity of settings in which you can do this type of contemplation.

7) Sarvam khalvidam brahma

All of this is Brahman
(All of this, including me, is that absolute reality)

The various insights are revealed: Gradually, one comes to understand and increasingly experience the deeper aspects of the other *Mahavakyas* (the six described above):

- Brahman is real; the world is unreal.
- Brahman is one, without a second.
- Brahman is the supreme knowledge.
- That is what you are.
- Atman and brahman are the same.
- I am brahman.

They sing a song together: As one comes to experience the truth of the individual *Mahavakyas*, it seems they come together in a song, that cries out in joy, "*All of this is brahman!"* As was said in the beginning, it is a process that comes from person-to-person listening (written and oral), followed by deep reflection, contemplation, and meditation.

Realization comes in stages:

- First, there is cognitive understanding of the meaning.
- Second, intuition rolls down, revealing deeper meanings.
- Finally, it is as if the one doing the practice travels upwards to merge in the direct experience, even though there was never any division in the first place.

7. Exercises with 'Sarvam khalvidam brahma'

All of this is Brahman
(All of this, including me, is that absolute reality)

What to do: Allow your awareness to try to encompass, at one time, the entire manifest and unmanifest universe, the objects and people in the world around you, as well as your own body and mind. Hold these together, as one whole, and reflect on the words, *"All of this is brahman! All of this is one!"* This builds on the other practices, and expands in its experience.

Mind is set aside in an explosion of awareness: Eventually, in the depth of meditation and contemplation, the entire mind is set aside in an explosion of awareness, in which the truth of the *Mahavakyas* comes forward, and is seen to have been there all along, ever still, waiting to be discovered in direct experience.